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Peter Probst

Betwixt and between An anthropologist's perspective on the history of African Studies in Germany¹

Abstract

The present essay aims to contextualize the recent debate of African Studies in Germany in a wider comparative and historical framework. Taking up an anthropological perspective it is argued that the specific issues in question mirror the well known features of ethnicity whose dynamics can be identified in the study of academic group identity as well. In order to substantiate this argument the essay explores the development of African studies in Germany with respect to the shifting relationships among and between the various segments constituting the field. It is concluded that its peculiar status of being 'betwixt and between' the two major spheres of British and French influence has all the potential to ensure German research a privileged position vis à vis the other players in the European league of African studies.

Keywords

African studies, Germany, international /country comparison, history of science, linguistics, anthropology

¹ The following essay is an abridged and slightly altered version of a contribution to a forthcoming US American volume on the features and regional profiles of African studies. It was written for a non German audience to give an overview of the developments and specific features of the subject in question. The view presented here is necessarily partial and impregnated by my training and professional experience as an anthropologist. Comments and critique came from numerous friends and colleagues. Femi Abodunrin, Thomas Bierschenk, Michael Bollig, Jan Georg Deutsch, Andreas Eckert, Johannes Fabian, Carola Lentz, Ute Luig, Gudrun Mieke, Onokome Okome, János Riesz, Klaus Schubert, and Achim von Oppen all read and commented upon earlier versions of this paper. I would like to thank all of them, stressing, of course, that the responsibility for all shortcomings and errors are solely mine.

Writing about African Studies in Germany can be seen as a lesson in academic ethnicity. It is certainly no coincidence that an encompassing history of African studies in Germany is yet missing.² Keenly suspicious of any attempt to create a hierarchical structure, what holds the various segments of African studies in Germany together is a notion of their togetherness based upon an historical narrative explaining disciplinary kinship relation. Like in other (ethnic) groups, both the notion and the narrative are primarily invoked vis-à-vis others in this way providing internal solidarity and mutual help in case of attacks from the outside. When probing deeper into the official story, however, it rapidly becomes apparent that the different segments all have their own rivaling and conflicting versions of what happened in the past and what is going on in the present.³

Thus, writing about African Studies in Germany is to some degree writing about a convenient fiction based upon the dubious appeal to the territorial confines of the nation state.⁴ Rather than presuming the existence of a clear-cut, distinctive unit, what we find when we talk about African studies in Germany is an array of different, even contradictory approaches. As such, the causes and dynamics giving rise to this community apply to a regional approach in African studies just as much as they do to the study of ethnicity in general. On the other hand, it needs to be accepted that the task of deconstructing the nation state also has its limits. Whatever we may think of the categories a group of people employ to endow themselves with a distinct history and identity, the fact is that these histories and identities do exist and continue to work. Accepting this premise, the very dynamics of these identities should allow us to identify certain features, which distinguishes the emergence and *changing* characteristics of African studies in Germany from developments in other countries. In other words, what ought to be taken adequately into account are the processual elements involved in this complex. After all, African Studies in Germany today is not only profoundly different

2 This is not to say that such histories do not exist. So far, however, they have come only from outside. For a recent example, see Diallo (2001). For the development of African studies in the former German Democratic Republic, see however Büttner (1992) and van der Heyden (1999).

3 See the vivid debate on the state of affairs of African studies in Germany Engel (2003), Bierschenk (2003), Reh (2003). The present essay is more a historical subtext to this debate than an active engagement with the critical issues in question.

4 No attempt has been made to cover the developments of African studies in the former German Democratic Republic. While writing this text I realized that my own understanding of the developments of African studies during this phase of German history differed substantially from the one of the actors themselves. To refrain from discussing it means to respect the difference and avoid the traps of imperial imagination implicit in any model of national history.

than it was during its 'classical period' in the first decades of the last century. Compared to other players in the European league of African studies it has also a special status.

The status of German African Studies

What distinguishes the present scene of African Studies in Germany from many other national scenes in Europe is probably best described by referring to its peculiar position of being 'betwixt and between'.⁵ That is to say, while Germany shares its long established history of African studies with that of France and Britain, the position it has is between these two major spheres of influence; belonging neither to the anglophone nor to the francophone traditions, but rather moving and maneuvering constantly between the two while at the same time maintaining a big yet somewhat concealed territory of its own. This again sets it apart from other smaller European countries like Sweden, Denmark or the Netherlands. In contrast to the situation in these countries, the mere size of the German speaking population (Germany, Austria, parts of Switzerland) has allowed it to give rise to a viable, self-sustained academic space not necessarily dependent on publication strategies in foreign languages.⁶ Given the increasing dominance of English as the scientific lingua franca, the effect is that for the international public unable to read German, the wide range of Africa-related research in Germany published in German has become rather hidden.

The visible parts, however, which do exist, refer to the highly competitive milieu they evolve from.⁷ All of these studies stem from a dynamic scene very

5 I am grateful to Carola Lentz and Thomas Bierschenk for drawing my attention to the importance of this feature.

6 For an overview of the range of Africa-related books and journals published in German see the website of two German publishing houses focusing on Africa-related research: Ruediger Koeppel Verlag (<http://www.koeppel.de/>) and LIT Verlag (http://www.lit-verlag.de/kataloge/afrika_2002.pdf). In addition see also the website of the Institute of African Affairs in Hamburg (<http://www.duei.de/iak/show.php>) The Institute functions as the base of the German Association of African Studies and is publishing the association's journal *Africa Spectrum*. The association has its own website: <http://www.vad-ev.de/>.

7 Major recently published monographs of German Africanists in the US and Britain include, for instance, Wolfgang Bender's (1991) and Veit Erlmann's (1991, 1996) studies on modern African music and South African performance; Heike Behrend's (1999) ethnography of war in Northern Uganda; Roman Loimeier's (1997) analysis of Islamic reform and political change in northern Nigeria; Guenter Schlee's ethno-historical study of ethnicity in Kenya (Schlee 1989); Fritz Kramer's (1993) work on the relationship between spirit possession and African art or the studies of Bernd Heine and his colleagues in the field of cognitive linguistics (Heine, Claudi and Huenemeyer 1991, Heine 1997) to name just a few. In addition there are numerous important edited volumes on topics like the making of African landscapes

much different from the one that existed during the 'classical period' of German African studies when the work of scholars like Carl Meinhof, Diedrich Westermann, Richard Thurnwald and Leo Frobenius served as well selling export ideas to other countries.⁸ Surely, not only the interests and research agendas have changed, but also the very conditions, which allowed such 'flows' to work. In the first decades of the 20th century Africa related research had not yet reached the high degree of differentiation as we experience it today. Being relatively few in number and with German, French and English still existing on more or less equal terms it was easier to follow the developments both in other countries as well as in other disciplines. Given these factors, it can be claimed that African studies in general was probably not only more international but also more interdisciplinary than it is nowadays. Or, to put it in other words, right from the start, African Studies was characterized by a keen awareness of mixtures and movements, contacts and connections not only between Africa and the rest of the world but also between Africanists themselves. Going all the way back to the mid-19th century, what stood out in the German version of this tradition was the comparatively remarkable prominence given to linguistics and language. The reasons for this were rooted in German history wherein a language-based notion of folk had to make good the perceived lack of a political nation state. As a result, the approach favored in Germany of seeing language rather as an expression of cultural values and ideas than a mirror of abstract logical operations became highly attractive for groups, which perceived their situation in similar ways.⁹

Though the importance of linguistics has remained – most of the places in Germany where Africa-related research is taking place today have linguists in

(Luig & von Oppen 1998), African languages (Heine & Nurse 2000), new local historiographies (Harneit-Sievers 2002), globalization and local vitality (Probst & Spittler 2004), spirit possession and power (Behrend & Luig 1999), the dynamics of violence (Elwert, Feuchtwand & Neubert 1999), everyday life in colonial Africa (Jones 2002), ethnicity in Ghana (Lentz & Nugent 2000), or visual media and the debate on African modernities (Behrend 2001, Deutsch, Probst, Schmidt 2002). Another example would be the entries of German Africanists on conflict (Elwert 2001), ethnicity and language (Schlee 2001), spirits and spirit possession (Luig 2001), work (Spittler 2001) or nomadism (Scholz 2001) in the new edition of the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. Last but not least, there are several important works published in French ranging from issues like village politics and the state in Benin (Bierschenk & de Sardan 1998), the coping with crisis and hunger among the Tuareg in Niger (Spittler 1993) to literary issues like the legacy of Patrice Lumumba in Francophone African Literature (Riesz & Halen 1997).

8 The influence of Frobenius on Senghor's notion of *négritude* is just one prominent example (Riesz 2002). Another is the German influence on American (cultural) anthropology through scholars like Franz Boas, Robert Lowie, Edward Sapir, and Alfred Kroeber (see Stocking 1996).

9 Members of the Harlem renaissance in the USA, for example, looked particularly to the early German pioneers of African studies as a source of inspiration and courage for their own project of creating a Black nation (Irek 1994a, b).

their midst, e.g. Bayreuth, Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Leipzig, Mainz, and Munich – the discipline has lost its leading role. Ironically, the relative decline was in a way self-induced for, as I am going to show further below: The very framework in which this loss of importance took place had been created by linguists themselves. The story behind this is the establishment of the German African Studies Association in 1969. Initially conceived and dominated mainly by linguists as a forum for new ideas and new inter-disciplinary work, the focus soon shifted in favor of members coming from the social sciences. In view of the fact that this process of ‘social sciencing’ African studies in Germany is up to now unbroken, it would be tempting to take the year 1969 as a suitable starting point for providing an insight into that somewhat mysterious box called ‘African Studies in Germany’. In terms of phases African studies has undergone the result would not differ much from the development in the US recently outlined by Jane Guyer (1996). The three eras Guyer has differentiated for the US context apply to the German scene just as well as probably to many others.¹⁰ Yet, as I mentioned above, the history of Africa-related research in Germany transcends the beginning of its formal institutionalization by far. In fact, depending on the various dates one sets to mark its beginning one gets different pictures with different histories and different players. The multiple traditions resulting here out belong together. Deeply entangled as they are, their various forms, interactions and intensities outline the scope of what, with all due reservation, might be called ‘African Studies in Germany’.

Given this complex situation, the following essay is organized into four parts. In the first part I will briefly outline the ‘primal scene’. As with many other African creation stories, the story of African studies in Germany too has its legendary sites and ancestors, places where it all began and figures who made it all happen. The second part focuses on the time between the wars, the so-called ‘classical period’ of German research on Africa, while the third part analyzes the development from the end of World War II to the reunification of the two Germanys. In the fourth and final part I will give an overview of the current developments and conclude with a note of the future role of German African studies within the European context.

10 According to Guyer, the first era was marked by basic research on newly emergent Africa and the independence struggles, the second era was characterized by a development agenda while the third and still lasting era is one in which the image of marginality and total collapse dominates the public perception of Africa. For the debate on African studies in US see also Berger (1997) and Alpers & Roberts (2002).

Formation and migration before and during German colonialism

African studies in Germany begin during the second half of the 19th century. The names commonly mentioned in this context are many (cf. Essner 1985; Marx 1988). While some refer to early travelers like Heinrich Barth (1821 – 1865) others stress the importance of scholars like Friedrich Ratzel (1844 – 1904). Both came from geography, a discipline, which together with linguistics provided the scientific basis on which the steadily incoming reports and artifacts from Africa were interpreted.

An important factor in this interpretation was the importance given to the role of diffusion and migration. Thus, Ratzel saw the history of mankind as a history of mixtures and movements, contacts and connections (Ratzel 1882). The central problem herein was not so much migration as such but rather the relationship between diffusion and migration, how culture could diffuse *without* migration.¹¹ The solution to this question was a combination of the economic insight into the circulation of goods and the idealistic argument that objects/goods are forms inhabited by ideas, a notion later taken up also by Frobenius. Using the Africana collection of the Ethnological museum in Leipzig as an empirical basis, Ratzel not only intended to prove his 'migration' theory by the analysis of African bows, but also tried to come up with a culture historical differentiation and grouping of African people (Ratzel 1889). Between 1835 and 1855 roughly two million people left Germany and migrated mainly to North America and South America, a minor portion to Australia and Russia. It was in this very context, the experience of migration as part of a lived social reality became a crucial formative factor in the emergence of African studies in Germany.¹²

The academic outcome was the study of the so-called 'culture areas' (*Kulturkreise*), an approach most often associated with Leo Frobenius (1873–1938). Conceived as an integral spatially bounded unit characterized by specific cultural traits, Frobenius first developed his ideas by studying the distribution of various African artifacts and religious institutions (Frobenius 1898a, b). On the basis of these results he distinguished between three culture areas or provinces (Upper Guinea, Congo region and Lower Guinea and Southwest Africa). Lacking any university degree, his work was initially received highly critical. Soon after, however, it was taken up and developed further by two young assistants at the Ethnological museum in Berlin, Bernhard Ankermann and Wilhelm Graeb-

11 I like to thank Johannes Fabian for the clarification of this point.

12 In his autobiography Ratzel (1966) himself hinted at the relationship between his migration theory and the fact he grew up in a poor rural area region in the Southwest of Germany where most of the early German migrants during that time came from.

ner. Both tried to connect the idea of the culture area (*Kulturkreis*) with that of cultural strata (*Kulturschichten*). In a famous meeting at the Berlin society of Ethnology, Anthropology and Prehistory, Ankerman and Graebner explained their approach (Ankermann 1905, Graebner 1905). Though the results were acknowledged as mere speculations, the firm belief was that the doubts would vanish if only the methods could be improved. The self-understanding was a positivistic one orientated at work of philology and history, which served as a kind of role model for the newly emerging ethnological museums.

Criticism came from Frobenius, who insisted that it was not enough to look merely at the outer forms of certain culture elements. What counted for him was the coherent idea, the total world-view that a bow, an arrow, a club, or a shield embodied. He argued that the focus was not the object as such but the relationships between the objects in which the essential pattern or *Gestalt* of a culture would reveal itself. In his view, to perceive and recognize this hidden quality was ultimately a gift of empathy and imagination not a matter of method.

The difference in the two positions just outlined, point to a long-established tension in the cultural and intellectual milieu of late 19th century German society. As such, the relationship between Ankerman and Graebner on the one hand and Frobenius on the other mirrored the relationship between the ideas of enlightenment and its specific undercurrent in the shape of German romanticism. Given this argument, it is not surprising to detect a similar tension in the field of philology as well. Thus, in the early formative period of the study of African languages in Germany the romantic impulse focusing on the organic vitality of the *Volksgeist* expressed in songs, fairy tales, poetry and other performative, notably oral, genres met with the ambitions of a comparative philology analyzing the grammatical rules and structures of spoken African languages whose results were interpreted along the taxonomic models developed in the natural sciences.¹³ Where one position referred to Humboldt and Herder, the other referred to Schleicher and Schlegel. Existing side by side, both fields were actually seen to complement each other, with the evolutionist and diffusionist paradigms providing the necessary framework for the historical development and origins of African languages and cultures. Thus in his *Nubian Grammar* the Berlin egyptologist Richard Lepsius (1880) took over Mueller's model and standardized it into a triadic classification which distinguished between the southern Bantu languages based on classes, the northern Hamitic languages based on gender, and a third mixed zone resulting out of the interactions between Hamitic and Bantu languages. Both models, that of Mueller and Lepsius, were actually an

13 A telling example of this position is Meinhof's short article on *Sprache und Volkstum* in the first volume of *Africa* (Meinhoff 1927). For an overview of the historical relationship between *Afrikanistik* and general linguistics see Mieke (1996).

inversion of the biblical stories about Babel and Noah which had inspired the classificatory scheme of early 19th century comparative philology.

This strong biblical imaginary in the early academic treatment with African languages was visible also in the sources available. Initially, the material for linguistic research – dictionaries, linguistic descriptions, word lists, collections of epics, songs, folk tales, etc. – stemmed almost exclusively from missionaries. Not surprisingly then, it were mainly missionaries and church-men who at the end of the 19th century made the study of African languages an academic subject.

In 1887, seven years after Lepsius' *Nubian Grammar* and two years after the Berlin conference at which Germany had entered the colonial league, the Institute for Oriental Languages was established at the Friedrich Wilhelm University (now Humboldt University) in Berlin. The institute's primary aim was to provide practical knowledge for the German traders, planters and government officials serving in the new colonies. The teaching therefore focused mainly on Swahili as the lingua franca in German East Africa. However, interest was also given to the study of Swahili literature and the linguistic analysis of African languages in general. One outcome was the establishment of linguistic journals such as *Zeitschrift für Afrikanische Sprachen* and *Zeitschrift für Afrikanische und Ozeanische Sprachen*. Among those who published their work herein was Carl Meinhof (1857–1944), one of the most eminent scholars in African linguistics in the first half of the 20th century. Working originally as a vicar interested in African languages, Meinhof became an academic when his first major study, *An Outline of the Phonetics of Bantu Languages*, earned him a position at the Institute of Oriental Languages in Berlin, first as a lecturer and in 1905 as a professor. Meinhof's comparative phonology broke new ground and opened up the door for research on Bantu languages (Meinhof 1909, 1915). In 1907 he left Berlin and moved to Hamburg where he became director of the department of colonial languages at the newly opened Colonial Institute. Institutionally, the institute at Hamburg stood in direct competition to the Institute of Oriental Languages in Berlin. On a scholarly level, however, co-operation prevailed. Thus shortly after his arrival in Hamburg Meinhof began a collaboration with Diedrich Westermann, another former missionary, who in 1910 had been appointed professor in the Department for Oriental Languages in Berlin. What followed was the academic institutionalization of African studies in Germany. In 1916 the Ethnological museum in Berlin had divided their hitherto joint African and Oceanic collection and established an independent Africa department with Bernhard Ankermann as its first director. In 1919, after the foundation of the University of Hamburg, Meinhof got the first chair for African languages. Another six years later, in 1925, Diedrich Westermann was appointed to the first chair for African languages and cultures at Berlin University. Both appointments were actually only made after the direct colonial era of Germany had ended. In other words, African Studies developed more systematically as an academic discipline only after the end of the colonial period.

Imagination and instrumentalization between the two world wars

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century the colonial experience was characterized by a high degree of global interconnectedness and interwovenness with the *fabric of world economy* (Thurnwald 1910). In this highly dynamic milieu of contacts and connections, diffusionism was seen to be a kind of cultural geology. That is to say, the various elements of a culture were sorted out according to the historical sequence by which the different cultural 'flows' had crossed one another. The explicit aim was to order the surface chaos, which resulted from the overall cultural mixture.

The distinct political feature of this approach is perhaps best illustrated by Leo Frobenius.¹⁴ The fatal hostility Frobenius claimed to have discovered in Africa between 'hamitic' and 'ethiopic' cultures was seen to mirror an encompassing binary principle governing world history in general. In this way the *hamitic* force in Africa, which Frobenius associated with pastoralists and magic, warriors and state builders and which spatially corresponded with Meinhof's distribution of hamitic languages, underlay also the materialistically and rationally orientated cultures of England and France. In contrast, the *ethiopic* force associated with farming and religion, planting, and mystic, spatially corresponding with Bantu and Westermann's Sudanic languages, was seen to be the spiritual force or *soul* impregnating Germany and Russia.

There were many other African scholars between Frankfurt, the seat of Frobenius' *Institut für Kulturmorphologie*, and Vienna, where Fathers Wilhelm Schmidt and Wilhelm Koppers had built up a hardly less influential school of culture history (Schmidt & Koppers 1924), following similar projects. Yet African studies during the inter-war period in Germany entailed much more than a focus on culture history alone. It comprised also scholars who were inclined to functionalism.

A case in point for this dual nature of African studies in Germany was the relationship between Diedrich Westermann and Richard Thurnwald (1869–1954). Westermann had first worked as a missionary in Togo before entering the academic world. Thurnwald, roughly the same age as Westermann, had begun his career with anthropological fieldwork in Papua New Guinea. Both met in 1925 at Berlin University where Thurnwald, already 56 years of age, had been appointed to a professorship. His lectures on general anthropology, sociology and social psychology caught the interest of Westermann, who saw in Thurnwald's knowledge and experience a valuable asset for coming to terms with the tasks of developing a contemporary approach in social research on Africa. Thus,

14 For a good contextualization of Frobenius' work see Kramer (1985, 1986) and Streck (1995, 1999). For Frobenius' biography see Heinrichs (1998).

when in 1927 Westermann was appointed co-director of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures in London and – a year later – editor of the Institute's journal *Africa*, he saw to it that Thurnwald became a member of the executive council of the Institute.¹⁵

Thurnwald's functionalist approach and his interests in social change fitted well into the Institute's colonial agenda. Right from the start the focus was on the *changing African*. The general aim was to come to terms with colonial modernity. The ambience of decay, disintegration, and dissolution depicted as being characteristic of much of early 20th century Africa, resembled strongly the perception of fragmentation, fluidity, and fusion analysed by German intellectuals like Simmel, Benjamin, and Kracauer as dominant features of early 20th century Europe (Frisby 1986). Indeed, processes of urbanization, and industrialization applied to both continents and their implications and consequences were thus the main issue of research on both sides. There was, however, a crucial difference. While the above-mentioned authors writing on modernity in Europe accepted the experience of fragmentation and shock (Walter Benjamin), resulting from overwhelming experiences of ever new sensations, authors on colonial modernity in Africa fought against it and looked for means to reinstall social cohesion and equilibrium (cf. Probst, Deutsch & Schmidt 2002).

Thurnwald's own contribution to this task consisted in a sociological field study he and his wife carried out between 1930 and 1931 in what is now Tanzania. Funded by the International Africa Institute, the focus was on the emergence of a *New Civilization* resulting from contacts and relationships between *Black and White in East Africa* (Thurnwald 1935).¹⁶ The approach underlying the study was a fusion of different perspectives stemming mainly from French social psychology, German culture history, and British functionalist anthropology, making it difficult to give the study a definite label. When the book finally appeared in 1935, it failed to have a major impact. However, as indirect outcome, Thurnwald's use of the concept of *acculturation* became a success (Thurnwald 1932).

For Thurnwald the Tanzanian study added empirical evidence to the idea of human society and social change he had developed over the course of years (Thurnwald 1931-1935). Citing historical and anthropological examples, he argued that societies tend to have alternating rhythms of negative and positive attitudes towards foreign cultures. Within these waves, acculturation entails

15 Among the thirteen founding members of the Institute's editorial board were four from Germany and Austria: Karl Meinhof, Fathes Paul Schebesta and Wilhelm Schmidt, and Ludwig Schachtzabel, the successor of Bernhard Ankermann as director of the Africa department at the Ethnological Museum at Berlin.

16 In terms of its conceptual approach Thurnwald's idea of change basically followed Malinowski's program of culture contact, which he had outlined in the Institute's *Five Year Plan of Research* (African International Institute 1932). Methodically, however, the study was based not on participant observation but on questionnaires and surveys.

decision processes about which aspects of a foreign culture to reject and eliminate or to adopt and transform to fit core cultural norms and practices. On the basis of these decisions Thurnwald saw acculturation as a process proceeding in four stages ranging from withdrawal, imitation, *Völkertod* (ethnic death) to recovery understood as a blend of the old and new, making a culture viable and compatible with the contemporary world.

While in this way Thurnwald's contribution to African studies remained restricted to being an important stimulating factor for US American research on Africa, notably that of Melville Herskovits (Herskovits 1937),¹⁷ Westermann's work was much more directly involved in practical matters. As co-director of the Institute and editor of its journal Westermann steered a strictly interdisciplinary course combining linguistic, anthropological, and ethnological studies. Inclined more to the British doctrine of indirect rule than to the French approach of cultural assimilation, he saw his own linguistic competence as part of a general language policy, which aimed to influence the realm of moral education and political development. Together with Ida Ward, he published the handbook *Practical Phonetics for Students of African Languages* (Westermann & Ward 1934). Shortly afterwards followed *The African to-day* (with a foreword by F. Lugard), which actually started the African Institute's African Studies Series (Westermann 1934). The plea for a more person-focused perspective was expressed also in *The African Explains Witchcraft*, a collection of articles which Westermann had initiated for the 1935 volume of *Africa*, as well as in his *Africans tell their lives* (Westermann 1938), a number of biographical sketches in which he tried to oppose the dominant colonial perspective by giving the anonymous colonial subject a concrete face and individual history.¹⁸

Certainly, the finding does not differ all too much from the way how the established colonial power relations between master and servant were invoked in other parts of Europe at that time. What needs to be explained though, is the strength of this colonial practice and imagery in a country, which, after all, had already lost its colonies as a result of the first World War.

The answer to that goes back to the mid 1920s. In response to the Versailles treaty new colonial societies were established aiming to prepare Germany's victorious return to the colonial league. Step by step the revived *colonial idea*

17 During a visit to the US in 1932 Thurnwald gave lectures at Yale and Northwestern University where he also met with Melville Herskovits with whom he discussed the concept of acculturation (Melk-Koch 1989: 268f).

18 Though it might be possible here to detect a line going from the Christian missionary idea of *Naechstenschaft*, most explicitly formulated by Bruno Gutmann – another German missionary, linguist, anthropologist working among the Chagga in Tanzania (Gutmann 1932, 1966) – to the radical anthropological self-critique in terms of Johannes Fabian's influential concept of "co-evalness" (Fabian 1983), the attitude in all these works was nevertheless strongly paternalistic.

encroached also the academic domain. Thus the hitherto mainly philological orientation in African studies changed more and more to a rather culture-orientated focus. In 1933, for example, after the fascist's seizure of power, the Institute of Oriental Studies at Berlin became an *Auslandshochschule*, a kind of Foreign Service Academy. Its main aim was now to teach *Nationenwissenschaften* (nation sciences) aiming to provide practical insights into the specific cultural and psychic conditions of the lost colonies, which were soon to become part of the *Third Reich*. Given this context, African studies in Germany actively involved itself in the revanchist agenda of the Nazi regime by trying to document its own colonial usefulness.¹⁹ Despite prominent examples, it would be misleading, however, to see all members of African studies as playing an active role in Hitler's Germany. The appropriate picture was rather, as Dostal (1994) has called it, *silence in darkness*.

Politicization and transformation in west German African Studies

As in many other social study fields in post-war Germany, the first two decades of African Studies were a time of restoration and reorganization, continuation

19 In this respect the example of the Kolonialschule Witzenhausen is worth mentioning. Established more than a century ago, it trained students in tropical agriculture. Its successor was the Fachbereich Internationale Agrarwissenschaft at Kassel University – still using part of the old premises. Another telling example was Hermann Baumann. As an anthropologist belonging to the second generation of the German culture history school, Baumann's aim was to reshape the old *Kulturkreis* concept by not only focussing on the distribution of material artefacts but also by taking into account the role of landscape and language. Already in 1934, at that time still working at the Ethnological museum in Berlin, he had published an article in *Africa* in which he had outlined his ideas (Baumann 1934). In 1939, one year after the so-called *Anschluß* of Austria to Germany, Baumann moved from Berlin to Vienna to take over the chair of anthropology there. The former incumbent, Kopper, a close ally of Father Wilhem Schmidt, had been expelled in the course of the political purification programs. With Baumann came a strong proponent of the Nazi ideology. Shortly after his arrival in Vienna he published the handbook *Voelkerkunde von Afrika* (Baumann, Westermann & Thurnwald 1940). The scope of the book clearly conformed to the new demands. Organized into three parts, Bauman wrote on culture history, Westermann on language and education, and Thurnwald on colonial intervention and social change. All the three texts were impregnated by the revanchistic and expansionistic plan to reappropriate and reconquer the lost colonies. Thus Westerman, who had lost his position as co-director of the International African Institute with the outbreak of the war in 1939, affirmed the colonial master-servant relation and Thurnwald revived the old resentment against France when he criticised the French colonial policy of assimilation. Of all three authors, however, Baumann exemplified the new milieu most explicitly (Baumann 1940). His text is an oppressive blending of the idea of culture province, the linguistic model of a Hamitic invasion, and the new paradigm of race biology with its programs of race breeding and genetic manipulation. For other studies see Fischer (1990), Hauschild (1996), Linimayr (1994), Mosen (1991), and Streck (2000).

and transformation. With the reopening of the universities in the late 1940s the old, pre-war personnel in African Studies had remained more or less the same.²⁰ As a result the old interests and paradigms dominating the disciplines before the war remained more or less unchanged as well.²¹ It is therefore not astonishing that new ideas did not arise within the traditional center of African studies, i.e. linguistics and anthropology, but from the fringe of the established disciplines.

One such discipline was literature with Janheinz Jahn (1918 – 1973) as one of its most popular and most effective representatives. Jahn was trained in theatre studies, art history and Arabic. His interest in Africa was more or less incidental (Schild 1974, Lindfors & Schild 1976). In 1951 he had heard a lecture at the Institut Français in Frankfurt where Senghor spoke on the 'new negro poetry' (*la nouvelle poésie nègre*). Listening to Senghor's talk marked the beginning of his untiring collection and translation of African literature. In 1954 Jahn edited *Black Orpheus*, an anthology of modern African poetry (Jahn 1954). Three years later followed *Rumba Macumba* (Jahn 1957), another year later appeared his most famous and influential book *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture* (Jahn 1958). *Muntu* was not meant to be scientifically correct, it was a political statement. Drawing heavily on the ideas of Leo Frobenius and Placide Tempels, Jahn argued for the existence of a highly dynamic pan-African aesthetic practice driven by the rhythm of tribal drums and nourished by ancient ideas about the mystery of life. Jahn mapped an aesthetic topography of African culture which comprised dance, poetry, literature, religion, and music ranging from the African homeland across the *Black Atlantic*, to use a current notion, all the way to the US, Cuba, and Brazil.

Critics pointed to the manifold weaknesses and contradictions inherent in Jahn's essentialist argument. Yet *Muntu* stood for a radical change in the Western perception of Africa. Whereas Africa had been seen as continent which, in the words of Frobenius, 'had always received but had never given', *Muntu* provided a counter-model that allowed to see African cultures neither in terms of the manifold imperialist versions of inborn passivity and submissiveness nor in the colonial ideas ranging from the Darwinist image of the colonized as prey to the

20 In Frankfurt, Adolf Ellegard Jensen, a student of Frobenius who had succeeded him after his death in 1936 as director of the Frobenius Institute became incumbent of the new chair of anthropology in 1947. In 1947, Westermann was reinstalled as the director of the Institute of Oriental Languages in Berlin. In Hamburg, August Klingenberg, who had succeeded Meinhof in 1936, continued to hold the chair until 1954. In the same year Hermann Baumann, who had held the chair of anthropology in Vienna until 1945, resurfaced in Munich as chair of anthropology at the newly established institute of anthropology.

21 When in 1952 for example Diedrich Westermann's *History of Africa* appeared, this history was still one conceived mainly as culture history (Westermann 1952). Actually, Westermann had started to work on the book already in the early 1940s. In the turmoil of the war, however, the completed manuscript as well as the printing blocks got lost, so that Westermann rewrote the book anew after the war.

functionalist notion of a sick patient infected by a contagious modernity. Muntu presented an image of Africa as a strong and healthy 'Other' facing the West on eye-level. But decolonization processes and the shifting perspectives of the student movement back home pushed Jahn's work into the background, making way for studies in the field of political science, sociology, and history (Ansprenger 1961, Bley 1968, Geiss 1968, Grohs 1967, Tetzlaff 1970).

Up to then, the two main disciplines in German African studies, linguistics and anthropology, had not formed a joint association.²² With growing politicization this eventually changed. In 1969 the German Association of African Studies (VAD) was founded in Marburg. The initiative for this came from a group of young linguists who stood in critical distance to the field of African Studies in Germany at that time. As a move to overcome its traditional concentration on linguistics the 'young Turks', as some old professors labeled the dissidents, widened the term *Afrikanistik* thus opening the field for representatives of other disciplines dealing with Africa. The new association was to set a signal. It became a venture to new shores, a rebellion against the essentializing politics of the past. The constitution of the association formulated accordingly that *Afrikanistik* should be conceived as a contemporary, interdisciplinary, critical, and self-reflexive project actively engaged in collaboration with African colleagues (VAD 1970).

The Marburg conference marked the beginning of an increasing trend in the 'social sciencing' of African Studies in Germany.²³ Together with the process of decolonization in Africa this led to increasingly different understandings with respect to the 'function' of *Afrikanistik*. While in the East answers to such questioning were clearly defined by the state ideology, in the West they became a source of conflicts. During the 1972 conference of the German association of Africanists the hitherto latent tensions within the association broke out openly. Adherents of Marxist positions rejected the label *Afrikanistik* for being nothing more than '... the useless attempt to turn a geographical signification into a problem' (Hinz 1976:217). Similar to the developments in other Western countries,

22 There were of course earlier lobbies, such as the Institute of African Affairs in Hamburg and the German African Society in Bonn. However, their purpose was more of an applied and practical nature in terms of serving as political and economic consultants for the government. In fact, it was also the strongly conservative character of the German African Society against which the new association was directed.

23 The trend is clearly reflected in the early VAD conferences. While the first conference focussed on problems of interdisciplinary collaboration, the second conference was devoted to the notion of *Africaneity* (*Afrikanität*) and theoretical problems of socialism in Africa (Grohs 1971). In contrast to the first meeting linguists were now in the minority. The trend in "social sciencing" African Studies continued. The third VAD meeting in 1971 had ethnic minorities and nation building in Africa as its theme (Hinz 1974), the fourth conference problems of social sciences in Africa (Benzing 1975), while the fifth discussed methods of Africanist research and teaching in Germany (Benzing & Bolz 1976).

what was demanded instead was a political idea of African studies informed by an acute awareness of Africa's attempts to resist the neo-imperialist and capitalist ambitions of the West. As a result, African Studies were seen to have the responsibility to help and assist African countries in this very resistance. Faced with such a demand, those linguists who had once initiated the VAD (among them especially Bernd Heine, Wilhelm Möhlig, and Hermann Jungraithmayr) increasingly felt that the original aim of the association had failed. The intention to discuss genuine linguistic questions in an open, constructive dialogue with other disciplines was perceived as having lost the interest of the audience. Moreover, the self-understanding of Africanists was much more indebted to a rigorous inductive approach, a fact which made it increasingly difficult to find common ground with members of other disciplines who, as the linguists thought, followed all too often preconceived theoretical concepts (cf. Möhlig 1976). In 1978 the founders of the VAD therefore formed their own conference platform, the so-called *Afrikanistentag* in Cologne (Möhlig 1995). In contrast to the VAD conferences, the bi-annual meetings of the linguists, much more than the anthropologists, henceforth maintained the historical focus as part of their discipline's legacy.²⁴

In the 1970s, with new persons, subjects and research issues, the academic landscape became more colourful. In Bayreuth for example a focus on *new literatures* at the departments of English and Romance languages was established which set the standard for subsequent ventures at other universities (cf. Riesz 2003; Breitingner 2003). Equally in Bayreuth, Iwalewa house was founded, focusing on contemporary African art, literature, and music. With the incorporation of the library of Janheinz Jahn into the department of anthropology and African studies, another stimulating milieu evolved in Mainz where research shifted on decolonization, the study of new elites, modern African literature, popular music and art. In Heidelberg, a number of young lawyers formed the African Law Association with the aim to spread knowledge about the laws of the various jurisdictions on the African continent and to encourage studies of African law. With an anthropological focus, the study of African law became also a major feature at the anthropology departments in Munich and Muenster. In Hamburg, Hannover and Bremen new history courses were founded under the rubric of overseas history, concentrating mainly on African colonial and economic history in the former German colonies. Last but not least, at the Free University in Berlin, the study of African states became with the 'Arbeitsstelle Politik Afrikas' a major

24 By the late 1970s the grand narratives of culture history had been duly buried. The last major work indebted to this tradition was Hermann Baumann's posthumously published *Die Völker Afrikas und Ihre Traditionellen Kulturen* (Baumann 1975). See, however, the revival and modification of this research in Sweden (Jacobson-Widding 1984, Zwernemann 1983).

research focus at the department of political sciences while at the department of anthropology interest shifted towards the analysis of African societies along the lines of British social anthropology.

The increasingly political orientation and agenda of African Studies was also reflected in the organized take over of the erstwhile conservative German Africa Society mentioned earlier by a number of like-minded young scholars in African Studies identifying with the emerging solidarity movement. During the mid-1970s they had managed to spend the state subsidies on the rather influential journal 'Afrika heute' (later transformed into 'Afrika heute/III. welt') for political agitation by turning the coverage of African and other 'Tiers Mondisme' themes into a mixture of partisan scholarly analysis with propaganda support for the social movements representing (or at least claiming to represent) anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles on the African continent and elsewhere.²⁵ As a result of the 'hijacking', the German government ultimately stopped all funding to both the society and the journal, which led to the slow but irreversible death of the project.

Differentiation and concentration in the 1990s – new perspectives at the horizon?

The academic milieu in West Berlin had been impregnated by the political situation. Cut off from the rest of the republic, interaction and communication between the various places of African studies remained limited. With the fall of the Berlin wall and the subsequent interaction between new and remodeled Africa related research institutions at Humboldt University, Free University and the Center of Modern Oriental studies, however, the entangled notion of exclusion and exclusivity prevailing during the decades prior to reunification made way to a restructuring and increasing differentiation of the academic landscape.

To some extent, the transformation of the academic landscape in Berlin can be seen as symptomatic for the situation in Germany as a whole. What prevails is a rather heterogeneous picture of themes and interests which make it difficult if not impossible to speak of a distinct German feature of African studies any longer. The 'traffic in culture' (Marcus & Myers 1995) has affected the landscape of African studies as well. Recent English publications by German scholars show that, contemporary African studies in Germany differ not any longer fundamentally from those in the US, France, Britain or the Netherlands.

This is not say that certain national features have not survived. Thus, what might be detected as a rather German element – at least in the realm of social sciences – is the acute sensibility for the importance to study social phenomena from a detailed historical and comparative, interregional or transcontinental perspective, a latent legacy, so it could be argued, of pre-war research interests.

To show the specific achievements of this approach as applied in the study of politics, material culture, arts, and religion would surpass the limits of this essay by far. As mentioned in the beginning, the purpose of this essay is mainly to historicize the current debate on African studies in Germany by looking at the way African studies evolved over the past century. What remains to be looked at in this context is the role of the national funding situation and the effects of recent political developments

Of special importance in this respect are the German Research Foundation and the way it has fostered inter-disciplinary work in the framework of a specific research agenda on a long-term basis.²⁵ Thus the institutionalization of collaborative research centers, so called *Sonderforschungsbereiche* (SFB), seemed to have had not only a stabilizing effect on African studies. It also led to certain centralization processes within the German landscape of African studies. Given that the programs operate for a length up to twelve years, they can generate and/or consolidate jobs and distinct local research profiles. Since this requires not only a sustained effort on the part of individual members to maintain the quality of research but also the support of the university and the authorities of the federal states, centers are embedded in a changing political environment which makes the success of research dependent also on extra-academic factors. The following list shows the old and new centers, which have been established over the past years.

- Bayreuth: 'Identity in Africa' (1984 – 1997), 'Local Action in Africa in the Context of Global Influences' (2000 – present)
- Cologne: 'Arid Climate, Adaptation and Cultural Innovation in Africa' (1995 – present)
- Frankfurt/Main: 'Culture Development and Language History in the West African Savannah' (1988 – 2003)
- Hamburg: 'Processes of Social Transformation and their Mastering in Africa' (1999 – 2002)
- Mainz: 'Processes of Change in Historical Fields of Tension in Northeast Africa and West Asia' (1997 – present)

New centers are bound to come. It seems likely though, that their location will increasingly depend on the way, how the different departments and universities will strategically position themselves in the current political transformation of

25 A background to and overview on the links between this specific generation of German scholars in African Studies and the solidarity movement emerging from the student generation during the 1960s and culminating in the mid-1970s offer Kössler & Melber (2002).

26 The German Research Foundation started these programs back in 1964. In the beginning they comprised mostly research initiatives in the natural sciences. From the late 1980s, however, African studies came into the scene as well.

the academic landscape. Thus, the BA system, which is currently introduced in German universities as a result of the so-called Bologna process, is about to affect the regional diversity of African studies as well. Guided by competitive branding policies on the side of universities what was hitherto more a patchwork tends to change into a distinct pattern. In other words, what can be observed is an increased entanglement of national and supranational research agendas.

Given the growing importance of the European Union as a common political and economic project, the corresponding notion of a common European identity may come to serve as a kind of filter through which differences between research activities taking place inside and outside of Europe are perceived and negotiated. In fact, the existence of AEGIS (Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies), a network of Africanist institutions mainly from European Union member countries, which was established in 1991, can be seen as a direct outcome of this development. The present situation is likely to represent an early phase in the formation of a more encompassing European Association of Africanists modeled on the African Studies Association in the US.²⁷

On the other hand, there is the example of APAD (*Association Euro-Africaine pour l'Anthropologie Changement Social et du Développement*), based in Marseille, France, and founded roughly around the same time as AEGIS.²⁸ Even though membership in APAD is open, the majority of members are coming from the francophone sphere. Being mostly concerned with developmental issues, the objectives of APAD are different from that of AEGIS. Nevertheless, the difficulties of APAD of bringing anglophone and francophone scholars together effectively indicate the problems AEGIS might face as well.²⁹

Given the current transitional situation, it might well be that the position of African studies in Germany of being 'betwixt and between' will still last for some time. 'As long as such an interregnum offers exposure to a variety of different schools of thought and provides additional stimulating confrontations and chal-

27 A certain indication for the validity of such an argument is the first AEGIS European conference, which took place from June 29 to July 3, 2005 in London and attracted a remarkable number of scholars. Furthermore, the first "Africa Yearbook", launched as an annual publication emerging from and jointly produced by three member institutions of AEGIS (but interestingly neither from English nor French speaking countries), points into the same direction (cf. Mehler, Melber & van Walraven 2005). It is noteworthy that it has its origins in the annual 'Afrika Jahrbuch', issued since the late 1980s by the Institute of African Affairs. The publication transformed from an exclusive German into a collaborative European annual while maintaining a high degree of participation from German scholars and reflects the will for increased inner-European collaboration.

28 I thank Thomas Bierschenk for information on APAD.

29 Similar challenges of bridging the anglophone-francophone divide faces since its establishment in the late 1970s the European Association of Development Training and Research Institutes (EADI), which includes scholars and institutions focused on African studies.

lenges instead of resulting in self-centered isolation, there seems no reason to be worried about this peculiarity.

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Résumé

Le présent article a pour but de situer le récent débat sur les études africaines en Allemagne dans un cadre historique et comparatif plus large. Adoptant une perspective anthropologique, il est argumenté que les problèmes en question ici reflètent les caractéristiques bien connus de l'ethnicité dont les dynamiques peuvent être également identifiées en étudiant l'identité des milieux académiques. Pour corroborer cet argument, le présent article se penche sur le développement des études africaines en Allemagne en prenant en considération l'évolution des relations à l'intérieur et entre les différents domaines constituant cette discipline. L'article en conclut que le statut particulier des études africaines en Allemagne 'betwixt and between', contre et entre, les deux sphères majeures d'influence française et anglaise, donne à la recherche allemande une position privilégiée et prometteuse par rapport aux autres acteurs de la scène européenne.

Mots clés

études africaines, Allemagne, comparaison internationale, histoire des sciences, linguistique, anthropologie

Zusammenfassung

Ziel des vorliegenden Beitrages ist die Situierung der jüngeren Debatte über Afrikastudien in Deutschland in einem vergleichenden und historischen Rahmen. Ausgehend von der Einsicht in die Existenz akademischer Ethnizität, konzentriert sich der Aufsatz vor allem auf die Folgen der historisch wechselnden Beziehungen zwischen und innerhalb der einzelnen Felder, aus denen sich das Feld der Afrika-Studien zusammensetzt. Mit Blick auf die besondere deutsche Situation als 'betwixt and between' den beiden großen Einflussphären Frankreich und Großbritannien, wird auf die privilegierte und chancenreiche Position der deutschen Afrikaforschung im Vergleich zu anderen europäischen Nationen hingewiesen.

Schlagwörter

Afrikaforschung, Deutschland, Internationaler Vergleich, Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Sprachwissenschaft, Anthropologie

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